Chan Buddhism

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CHAPTER 4

The Early History of the Chan Tradition

In sharp contrast with the three other major schools of Chinese Buddhism, Chan did not originate in the Chinese appropriation of Indian Buddhist texts. Instead, its origins can be traced to the appropriation of Indian Buddhist practices—their adoption by and adaptation to the needs of Chinese Buddhists. As it would come to describe itself by at least the late tenth century, Chan developed as a "practice lineage," not a doctrinal school. As encapsulated in slogans repeated throughout East Asia by the middle of the Song dynasty, Chan was a "special transmission, beyond words and letters," that was based on "directly pointing toward the human mind, seeing one's nature, and becoming a Buddha."

As the fourth major way of Chinese Buddhism and the last to develop, Chan did not come about in a historical vacuum. It arose after half a millennium of accommodation between imported traditions of Buddhism and China's native cultural traditions. As conveyed through texts brought from India and Central Asia, Buddhist teachings had already taken deep root in Chinese culture. To extend the agricultural metaphor, over the centuries that Indian Buddhist teachings were being seeded into Chinese culture and society, some (like those of the Mahayana) proved readily compatible with the local climate while others did not. According to the metaphor, the great text-focused schools of Chinese Buddhism—Tiantai, Huayan, and Pure Land—derived from individual seed stocks that produced great and enduring groves of unified textual and ritual tradition. Chan was very different.

According to the best contemporary scholarship, Chan did not develop out of any single doctrinal tradition or in any single original

locale. Although tradition traces the initial flowering of Chan to the late-fifth-century arrival in China of the south Indian meditation master Bodhidharma, there is little evidence of a coherent Chan genealogy much before the eighth century. Instead, the seeds from which Chan developed were not all of a single type, and each strain underwent significant and largely independent adaptation in China's cultural soil. Simply stated, the historical record strongly suggests that Chan was quilted or grafted together over a period of two or three centuries as a pluralistic system. It was not until the last decades of the Tang dynasty that a relatively stable genealogy was firmly in place and not until the early Song that Chan was routinely summarized as a special transmission outside the teachings, not depending on words and letters, pointing directly at the human mind and becoming a Buddha. Incorporating many different strains of teaching and practice, Chan has all along been an ecological tradition—a highly diverse "dharma rainforest."

Of particular importance in reconstructing the early years of Chan have been texts and historical records that were most likely archived during the eighth and ninth centuries in the libraries of Tibet and at Dunhuang—an important city on the northern Silk Road in China. Most of these texts were recovered only at the turn of the last century, and many are only now being given serious attention. On the whole, they provide a glimpse of the Buddhist scene during the formative years of Chan that differs in some important respects from the description given in later Chan histories. Such texts describe a time of great spiritual creativity in which Chinese Buddhists found their own distinctive voices and accepted active responsibility for expressing their own original buddha-nature.

The traditional internal narrative of the birth of Chan begins decisively with the arrival of Bodhidharma and charts an unbroken lineage of direct transmissions of the Buddha's wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity from one Chan generation to the next. The continuous thread in this lineage of "gate-opening" relationships between teachers and students consists of the unwavering presence of a unique spirit or relational vitality. And in traditional Chan accounts of its own origins, it is this spirit that is granted priority—the lived meaning of truly liberating intimacy and compassion.

If the historical account of Chan's origins effectively suppresses

Chan's spiritual brilliance, however, the traditional account arguably errs in stressing the uniqueness of Chan's commitment to practice as opposed to doctrine. All of the other major schools of Chinese Buddhism also had ongoing traditions of meditative discipline or attention training. All were committed to the innovative Chinese conception of buddha-nature and a positive reading of emptiness *(sunyata)* as horizonless interrelatedness. Moreover, although they were founded on the authority of originally Indian texts and teachings, all three grew through the interpretative medium of commentaries written by Chinese—often at significant odds with Indian commentarial traditions. The shared ground among all four Chinese Buddhist traditions is substantial.

All the same, Chan did come to differ in important ways from Tiantai, Huayan, and Pure Land—ways that were to insure its unbroken practice, in China, down to the present day. These differences can be highlighted maximally by looking at the meaning of meditation and the primacy of teaching as a dynamic relationship and by considering how these contributed to new, specifically Chan constructions of the gates of wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity.

In Huayan, meditation and sutra recitation served as crucial supports for intellectual insight into the interdependence and interpenetration of all things. As such, they can be seen as resulting in the acknowledgment of the true and original nature of things—the attainment of wisdom. From a Chan perspective, such an understanding of wisdom is entirely too thin. Buddhist wisdom does not simply consist in seeing what buddha-nature is, but also means realizing in direct social demonstration what buddha-nature does. In this, Chan exemplifies a general Chinese disinterest in metaphysics and a correlative concern for relational transformation. Thus, Chan masters from Huineng onward invoked the inseparability of meditation and wisdom. Just as a body and its activity or functioning are only analytically distinct, meditation and wisdom are simply twin aspects of the nondual expression of buddha-nature or enlightening conduct.

Likewise, the very sophisticated description and practice of meditation in the Tiantai tradition was criticized as aiming only for complete and comprehensive awareness—that is, a capacity to embrace or include all things. While there is nothing inherently incorrect about

this aim, it is not a sufficient corrective for human suffering. For Chan, meditation means the expression of attentive virtuosity. It is not enough simply to be able to perceive all things calmly and with insight. Indeed, there is a liability in pressing too far in the direction of simple equanimity: an absence of reasons to act with compassion on behalf of all sentient beings. Attentive virtuosity means being able to accord with each and every situation and respond as needed, whether it is a situation of utter complacency or utmost crisis.

Finally, Chan represents a reframing of moral clarity that emphasizes meaningful improvisation and not a simple adherence to rules and precedents. Although this emphasis left some Chan practitioners (especially in eighth-century Sichuan province) open to charges of antinomianism and amorality, its more widespread effect was to encourage cutting through the presuppositions about what is possible and what is impossible—presuppositions that severely constrain one's ability to carry out the bodhisattva work of shifting the movement within each situation away from samsara toward nirvana. On the one hand, this led to valorizing the "true person of no rank" who is freely able to contribute to any situation as needed, unbound by the constraints of societal rules and roles. On the other, it led Chan masters to denounce the aim of Pure Land practice even while acknowledging its efficacy in attention training. In the words of Huineng, "It is your own mind that is the Pure Land." Salvation is possible here and now, in this very life.

Unlike the other schools of Chinese Buddhism, Chan did not valorize learning about the Buddha Dharma or teachings transmitted from India and Central Asia. It did not expend any energy on trying to organize those teachings or establish a hierarchy among them. Instead, it insisted on the possibility of expressing, in any circumstances whatsoever, our true and original buddha-nature. This one learned to do through entering into close and unprecedented relationship with a skilled and truly enlightening master. Book learning was, if anything, likely to be an impediment. What was crucial was the opportunity to encounter a direct, spiritual descendant of the Buddha—a true lineage holder in an unbroken line of transmission. The possibility of Chan rested, in short, on the emergence in China of homegrown buddhas.

This insistence on the centrality of a lived relationship in the real-

ization of Chan is summarized in the phrase "a special transmission, beyond words and letters." This translation obscures, however, the radically countercultural turn taken by Chan. The Chinese terms commonly translated as "words and letters"—*wen* and *zi*—have important connotations that are not captured in the English phrase and that clearly position Chan in a critical relationship with Chinese culture.

"Wen" originally referred to patterned regularities found both in nature and in human community. By extension, it came to refer broadly to culture and more specifically to the literary embodiment of cultural precedents. *"Zi"* is composed of the character for "child" under the "house" radical and originally meant to breed, nourish, bring up, or treat with fatherly love. It later came to mean a name, word, or written character. The connection here rests on the role of the written word in traditional Chinese understandings of self-cultivation and authority. As mentioned earlier, Chinese traditionally held that writing originated as the central medium of communication between the celestial and the human. It thus offered a means of regulating human conduct in keeping with the *dao* or patterning inherent to the cosmos as a whole. Learning to read and write meant duplicating, in and for oneself, the patterns of cultural precedent on which personal development and social and political harmony depended.

By positioning itself as a special transmission outside the teachings, not depending on words and letters, Chan claimed separation from the modes of authority fixed by Chinese tradition. Not depending on words and letters signaled Chan's willingness to criticize and transgress the cultural precedents and structures of mediation invoked by Chinese tradition. At the same time, however, it signaled a willingness among Chan practitioners to downplay the authority of text-based Buddhist teachings and to allow their own conduct to speak for itself.

This confidence led some Chan masters to go so far as to disparage Buddhist sutras and commentaries as "hitching posts for donkeys"—fixed points of reference for those incapable of appreciative and contributory virtuosity. Because this confidence emerged in the context of relational improvisations involving students and Chinese Buddhist teachers, it can be argued—as I have done elsewhere and at length (see Further Reading)—that Chan also came to differ markedly from other forms of Chinese Buddhism by clearly and emphatically situating

enlightenment in relationship. Chan enlightenment was not realized as the experience of an individual but only in the situational expression of buddha-nature in the drama of day-to-day life. For Chan, enlightenment was not just a possibility for all beings but necessarily realized with them.

By shifting its claim to authority from written texts and teachings to living teachers and the relationships they realized in direct encounter with their disciples, Chan was able to situate itself fully within Chinese culture. This radical shift enabled Chan to undertake a countercultural advocacy of Buddhism that was both broad and deep. But it also opened the possibility of undertaking an important countercultural —and yet profoundly ethical, not metaphysical—critique of other dominant forms of Buddhism in China. As many of the materials recovered from Dunhuang make clear, in the very earliest forms of Chan there was already a frankly maverick sensibility. Chan was radical in the twin senses of advocating a personal and direct return to (what it described as) the true roots of Buddhism and advocating a creative rooting in the vernaculars and values of specifically Chinese culture.

For example, it is now clear that while the arrival of Bodhidharma in China was a watershed in the emergence of a distinctively Chan approach to Buddhism, his reception by Chinese Buddhists was not unilateral. In the circle of spiritual and meditative adepts that formed in northern China around Bodhidharma and his closest associates, there were two main camps. In the first were those who effectively followed the major Indian commentarial traditions in understanding his teachings and the purposes of meditation. For them, meditative discipline consisted of a gradual winnowing out of unclear thought patterns and finally realizing a state of calm abstraction from the turmoil of sensory experience—a course of increasingly refined awareness culminating in the experience of supranormal perceptual abilities and insights.

In the other camp, there were those like the little-known Master Yuan who understood Bodhidharma's teachings and practice style as a radical critique of precisely such views. For them, relying on scriptures and commentaries and hoping to clear the mind gradually to the point of achieving absolute peace are obstructions on the path. Asked

by a student what is meant by the phrase "a demon mind," Master Yuan answered that a demon mind is sitting silently in a cross-legged position with your eyes closed and entering a state of supreme concentration. He even went so far as to suggest that having a "nonmoving mind"—one of the staple goals of traditional Indian sitting meditation—is just "bondage *samadhi*."

For Master Yuan and those aligned with him, verbal teachings fared no better than step-by-step methods of meditation. Echoing the silence of Vimalakirti and presaging future generations of Chan Buddhist masters, Master Yuan insisted that he had no teaching to convey and that words and written texts are deceptions that can only stifle bodily energy and spirit and make it impossible truly to conduct oneself as a buddha. Ultimately, there can be no question of following rules or principles or gradual courses of study in expressing our buddha-nature and entering into enlightening relationships as bodhisattvas.

The strategic differences between these camps would play a continuing role in the transition from accommodation to advocacy as Chinese Buddhism matured in the sixth through ninth centuries. In particular, they would reflect different approaches to negotiating the proper balance among political, social, and spiritual concerns as China's long period of disunity came to an end and the imperial center once again strengthened. An important turning point early in this process was the purge of Buddhism ordered by Emperor Wu of the Zhou between 574 and 577. Monasteries and temples were destroyed, Buddhist libraries were burned, and several hundred thousand monks and nuns were returned to lay society or drafted into corvée labor. But in addition, Wu also ordered that a steering committee of Buddhist monks be constituted to lead a reformation of Buddhism in China. These monks were selected on the basis of espousing beliefs and standards of practice that resonated well with the needs of the court and established a clear basis for government oversight with respect to the internal dynamics of the Buddhist community.

At the time of the purge and its aftermath, many of those in the Bodhidharma circle either fled to the mountains or went "underground" in lay society. Arguably, much of the rhetoric leveled against the gradualist and text-fascinated camps by proto-Chan teachers

like Master Yuan pivoted on the liability of its members for being coopted into the imperial demand for a well-behaved, tightly organized, and respectfully quietist Buddhist community. Indeed, the tension between these camps only resolved in the early to mid–eighth century, when Chan was forced to confront and reconcile differences in its strategic identity as an advocate of truly radical Buddhist practice. This occurred in the capital of Luoyang with the famous rift between the so-called northern and southern schools of Chan.

Toward the end of the seventh century, the East Mountain school in rural Hubei province emerged as the most prominent of the early Chan traditions, and its leader, Hongren, was widely identified as the fifth in a direct line of descent from Bodhidharma. At the turn of the eighth century, word of the school had spread to the court, and the Empress Wu invited one of Hongren's senior students, Shenxiu, to lecture in the palace. Shenxiu taught a blend of Tiantai meditation techniques and discourses on the "sudden and complete" teaching of buddha-nature, urging a gradual dissociation of our pure and original nature from the defilements of everyday human thoughts and awareness. His version of Chan sufficiently impressed the imperial court that he was invited to remain in the capital, established as an advisor to the court, and introduced to Luoyang's elite society. His school strengthened and would enjoy substantial patronage for several generations.

But in 730 trouble started. Shenxiu's claim to Chan authority came under public challenge from a monk named Shenhui who was teaching just south of the capital in Nanyang. Shenhui had studied briefly under Hongren and Shenxiu but claimed to have matured under the guidance of a second, little-known student of Hongren—the soon-to-be-famous Huineng. Shenhui charged that Shenxiu and his heirs had wrongly taken the patriarchal mantle in the lineage of Bodhidharma and Hongren, usurping the rightful place of Huineng, the legitimate sixth patriarch of Chan. It was Huineng, argued Shenhui, who had inherited the true sudden practice taught by Hongren and who had received as a symbol of this transmission Hongren's robe and bowl—the very robe passed down from generation to generation from the Buddha through Bodhidharma and on to Hongren. Shenxiu's teaching of meditative gradualism leading to an inward realization of

unbroken equanimity was a false reading of Chan. Meditation was not an indwelling process of experiential release—a function of sitting still with eyes closed, concentrating on the breath or some other focus of attention. Meditation was wisdom in action.

All of these charges were levied in a public council convened by Shenhui for the purpose of purifying the tradition and restoring the roots of Chan. A complete record of this council and its exact outcome are no longer extant. It is clear, however, that the "northern school" of Chan did suffer a great loss of prestige and that Shenhui's genealogy of the "southern school" eventually became accepted by all of the Chan traditions surviving into the ninth century. Given the extant eighth-century literature on Shenhui, it is arguable that his advocacy of Huineng's approach to Chan was successful in its own terms, for reasons rooted in the historical context of Chinese culture and society. Shenhui himself was viewed by many as overly ambitious, self-promoting, and given to spiteful and discordant campaigns against those who blocked his own advancement. Indeed, his own lineage was not particularly long-lived and faded from view with the death of Zongmi—the last Chan lineage holder claiming descent from Huineng via Shenhui.

The tragic decade from 754 to 763 brought about a widespread collapse of all institutionalized forms of authority. With their legacy of rural practice, the early Chan traditions—especially those in central and southwest China, far from the imperial capital—were well situated to survive the waves of military, economic, and political chaos that swept the country. Out of this, there emerged a set of strong Chan traditions dedicated to the demonstration of responsive virtuosity. Among these, three were particularly vibrant.

The Niutou, or Oxhead, school, claiming a separate lineage back to the fourth Chan patriarch, Daoxin, and the likely point of origin for the *Platform Sutra* of Huineng, would fade from view by the end of the ninth century. But the traditions established in the eighth century by two of Huineng's "grandsons" in the Dharma would spawn the so-called Five Houses of Chan and have survived to the present day. To Chan master Shitou can be traced the houses or family lines of Caodong, Fayan, and Yunmen Chan. Out of Chan master Mazu's Hongzhou school—spread throughout Jiangxi and Hubei provinces and centered on his distinctive use of "shock tactics" and the absence of

any barriers between awakening and ordinary mind—there emerged the houses of Guiyang and Linji.

As the Tang dynasty began crumbling in the late ninth century and China fell into another period of disunity, internal tensions with Chan's identity came again to the foreground. While the lineages from Huineng through Mazu had survived the persecutions of Buddhism in 845, and Linji Chan (later known in Japan as Rinzai Zen) and Caodong Chan (later, Soto Zen) were emerging as the most vibrant traditions of Chinese Buddhism, there was great political pressure for Buddhism to play a moderating or reconciliatory role nationwide. Within Chan, the crucial question was whether Chan transmission took place in accord with the teachings and the fixed institutional structures these implied or if it took place "outside the teachings."

The followers of Linji during the Five Dynasties period between the Tang and the Song were adamant that Chan retain its critical role—not only with respect to Buddhist structures of authority but vis-à-vis Confucianism and Daoism as well. Others advocated a "harmony between Chan and the teachings" and promoted Buddhism as a force for reconciliation and the restoration of social and political stability. Most notable among the latter group were the followers of Fayan (885–958) located in the small but culturally and economically important kingdoms of Jiangxi and Wuyue. Wedded as it was to the long-standing Chinese concern for cultural continuity and stability, so-called Wuyue Buddhism was very appealing to those seeking the political reunification of China. In addition, several of the more prominent teachers associated with the movement urged syntheses between Chan and other forms of Chinese Buddhism as well as respect for many Confucian and Daoist values. This drive toward functional syncretism came to be a lasting factor in the popular practice of religion in China and the belief that, at root, "the three teachings are one."

Linji's radical Chan rejected not only Indian texts and teachings but the Chinese classics as "hitching posts for donkeys." It also promoted a deep celebration of the dramatic correctives that emerged in the context of student encounters with indigenous or homegrown buddhas. In combination, these made it imperative that advocates of critical Chan craft a self-consistent, legitimating narrative capable of warranting its right to express and establish the full meaning of Buddhist prac-

tice and awakening. At the center of this narrative—around which there consolidated a lasting and exclusively Chan sense of Buddhist identity—was an (apparently apocryphal) exchange between the Buddha and his disciple Mahakasyapa.

Shenhui had already argued that Huineng was the legitimate heir of Bodhidharma's teaching and practice by citing Hongren's hand-to-hand transmission to him of the Buddha's robe and bowl. According to Shenhui, this was the thirty-third in series of such transmissions beginning with the Buddha's gift of these items to Mahakasyapa. By at least the beginning of the eleventh century, the exact nature of this original transmission came into rhetorical focus.

For example, in the *Gateless Frontier Pass (Wumen guan)*, this exchange is directly presented as the seminal "transmission outside the teachings"—the original instance of enlightening, silent resonance between Buddhist teacher and Buddhist student. Asked to teach before a large assembly on Vulture Peak, the Buddha is said to have simply held up a single flower. So unexpected was this response that the entire assembly was left speechless. Only Mahakasyapa understood the Buddha's action and broke into a smile. The Buddha then stated that he held the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvana, the handle on the formless dharma gate of the formlessness of true form—a dharma not depending on words and letters, a special transmission outside the teachings. "This," he said, "I offer to Mahakasyapa."

Why did Chan advocates single out Mahakasyapa as their ancestral link to the Buddha? No internal Chan discussion of this is extant. Nor would one be expected, given Chan's expressed affirmation of this exchange and the spiritual genealogy resulting from it as simple historical realities. It is interesting, though, to note that Mahakasyapa's first instructions from the Buddha involved cultivating a sense of shame about prior wrongdoings, respecting the lineage of his teachers, and practicing continuous mindfulness of the body combined with gladness. These elements became important parts of Chan's practical structure. Shame also plays a powerful role in the Confucian construction of self-cultivation. For Chinese audiences, its social function would have been apparent. But from a Buddhist perspective, there is a subversive element in shame: it is not something objectively

imposed by external authorities, but rather a recognition, in oneself, of the quality of one's conduct. To cultivate a sense of shame is to become fully responsible for oneself, to hold within oneself the power of authoring virtuosity. This idea accorded rather well with Chan's critical stance and its conviction that it is possible—here and now—to become a buddha.

Importantly, Mahakasyapa was also renowned for his ability to associate freely with laypeople, taking joy in their joys, finding Buddhist fortunes in their good fortune, and demonstrating the meaning of awakening in even the most mundane circumstances. This relational skill was said to be a function of his deep capacity for attentive virtuosity, or *samadhi.* Like the Mahayana figure Vimalakirti, Mahakasyapa was able to adapt, unperturbed, to any and all situations and can be seen as a prototype for the expression of Chan mastery in the midst of ordinary life. He was also, however, responsible for undertaking the first internal critique of Buddhism, calling a council of Sangha elders to discuss the lax conduct of certain monks and nuns after the Buddha's death and to authorize a canon of the Buddha's teachings (Dharma) and communal regulations (Vinaya). Indeed, although the Buddha explicitly refused to authorize anyone to lead the Buddhist community after his own death, Mahakasyapa was often referred to as the "father of the Sangha."

Given Chan's claim with respect to other forms of Buddhism in China, all these qualities would have been important. But certainly, Mahakasyapa's particular karmic background must have factored into his adoption as first ancestor. In nineteen of his lives that are recounted in the *Jataka Tales* of the Buddha's own prior lives, Mahakasyapa was a close relative of the Buddha-to-be; in six, he was the future Buddha's father. This family connection would have resonated strongly with the Chinese disposition for seeing all relationships in familial terms. But, in addition, Mahakasyapa was unique among the Buddha's closest disciples in that he did not embark on his spiritual quest as a lone deserter of the home life. Instead, he did so with his wife—a woman who matched his ideals and shared his commitment to discovering a way of finally resolving all suffering. Meeting great social resistance to traveling together—a man and woman—as spiritual seekers, they decided to separate, vowing that whoever was the

first to awaken under a good teacher should then find the other. As it happened, both found their way to the Buddha and realized full liberation under his guidance.

Granted the long-standing Chinese denunciation of Buddhist clergy as nonfilial, Mahakasyapa's strong family karma would not have been incidental. Among the Buddha's other closest disciples, the two most respected—Sariputra and Mahamoggallana—were known respectively as the "marshal of the Dharma" and the "master of psychic powers." Mahakasyapa demonstrated a socially viable middle way between the scholar and the mystic—one capable of bringing about communal harmony and a sense of familial care and respect even among literal strangers. Adept at responding within social situations, loyal to his parents and teachers, capable of questioning authority and authoring the creative extension of tradition, Mahakasyapa exemplified precisely the kind of Buddhist mastery required in the crucial years of the late Tang and Five Dynasties period.

As the narrative of Mahakasyapa's silent transmission from the Buddha came to enjoy canonical status, Chan's insistence on the ultimate authority of a silent transmission outside the teachings was effectively legitimated. Along with this acceptance came a spiritual imperative to realize the meaning of Mahakasyapa's smile—the simple gesture that had earned him a direct transmission of the Buddha's awakened mind. As Chinese Buddhists came to accept the reality of their own homegrown buddhas, it was only natural that this imperative be extended to the more immediate enlightening relationships between Chinese Chan masters and their students.

These elements of Chan led to the birth of new genres of Buddhist writing in China: "flame histories" and discourse records; encounter dialogues *(wenda);* and, finally, the famous Chan *gongan,* or "public cases." These recordings of the sayings and teachings of Chan masters, their dramatic relationships with students, and their condensation and compilation as public cases of liberating intimacy became the primary resources on which Chan advocacy drew and through which the tradition evolved. They also became concrete avenues by means of which there took place a meaningful accommodation of Chan within Chinese culture, particularly in the early to mid–Song dynasty. Indeed, it is now clear that the literary golden age of Chan occurred in the

eleventh and twelfth centuries, not in the almost mythically creative period of the Tang.

Some contemporary scholars conclude from this fact that Chan virtually invented itself in the early Song, writing its history in an outburst of collective, creative genius in response to the practical necessity of earning economic and social patronage in the new society of the Song. This conclusion seems to me an unfortunate consequence of enforcing current academic standards of external or objective evidence in the study of Chan.

The internal Chan view has been that the literary explosion of the Song stands as evidence of a degeneration of the tradition. Since it is a tradition self-consciously rooted in the impossibility of capturing the meaning of enlightenment in words and letters, this view seems entirely self-consistent. Because it is a tradition that insisted as well on the personal demonstration of responsive virtuosity and the relational expression of truly liberating intimacy among all things, it also seems self-consistent that instances of such demonstrations would become a well-rehearsed and central part of Chan's communal lore.

That these instances would only much later be formalized in written form is no more difficult to understand than the similar history of standards in improvised forms of music like blues and jazz. These standards were played, embellished, and transmitted for several generations before being committed to writing and subjected to musical analysis. Many blues and jazz traditionalists saw this objectification of the music as the first signs that it had begun dying—a death that was averted, some would argue, only by the infusion of the tradition with new instruments for making these unique kinds of music. Similarly, it seems reasonable that Chan improvisations of enlightening relationships flourished for the better part of a century in the complete absence of any written scores and that the commission of these to writing—initially in the strict idiom of the classical Chinese scholar—was first perceived as the beginning of the end. The classical language was quickly turned to other uses, blended with vernacular narrative structures and tropes, and gave rise to a renaissance of Chan sensibilities as expressed in the written form.

In either case, it remains clear that the advocacy of Chan was undertaken first and foremost in the most deeply personal of ways.

The traditional Five Houses of Chan were, indeed, "family" lineages rooted in the personal transmission of the character of Chan awakening. Although only the Linji and Caodong lines would survive beyond the Song, it is the utterly intimate nature of Chan teaching that has allowed Chan Buddhism to continue flourishing not only throughout the Song dynasty and in the late Ming and Qing dynasties, but also on to the present day in both Asia and the West.

The transmission of Chan sensibilities takes place as virtuosic teachers immerse themselves in exemplary relationships with their students, teaching with words but certainly not through them. If the traditional accounts are to be respected, then there is no alternative but to admit that the communication taking place among Chan masters and their students has never consisted primarily of an exchange of information but of the realization of an almost musical resonance—a shared spirit of enlightening endeavor. Short of entering into such a relationship, the only means of addressing this spirit is to attune oneself, as fully as possible, to the traditionally expressed narrative rhythms of living Chan.

About the Author

Peter D. Hershock is coordinator of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center. A practicing Buddhist as well as a scholar, his research focuses on applying Buddhist conceptual resources across a broad spectrum of contemporary issues, including technological change and development, human rights, social activism, and the interplay of reason and emotion. Among his publications are *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism,* a study of the social nature of Ch'an Buddhist liberation, and *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age,* a Buddhist critique of the impact of mass mediation and information technology on community and cultural diversity.